

Bellmer's Argentine Doll: Alejandra Pizarnik and the Disarticulation of the Self

Melanie Nicholson
Bard College

an obsession
a children's tale
a tearing

—A. Pizarnik¹

Alejandra Pizarnik (Buenos Aires, 1936–72), whose intensely personal lyric poetry and death by suicide have prompted associations with Sylvia Plath, is increasingly recognized as one of the major figures of twentieth-century Spanish-language poetry.² Pizarnik's obsessive treatment of death, self-knowledge, and the limits of language has been examined in an extensive body of criticism produced on both American continents. Her complicated relationship to surrealism, though amply documented, leaves room for further critical investigation. It is my contention that Pizarnik, in work ranging from her early dense lyrics to the expansive and sometimes obscene prose of her last years, constructs a poetic self that bears a remarkable resemblance to the constructed and photographed dolls of the German surrealist Hans Bellmer (1902–75). To track such resemblances is perhaps to set foot on a slippery slope: one must take into account vast differences in the modes of representation (sculpture/photography versus poetry), in the artists' culture of origin, and in their respective biographical and historical contexts. Nevertheless, I believe that a comparative look at Pizarnik's doll imagery and Bellmer's *poupée* will deepen our understanding of Pizarnik's poetic representation of the self, in particular her allusions to loss of selfhood through the tropes of doubling, deformation, and frag-

mentation. It will bring to light a latent visual quality in Pizarnik's often conceptual imagery. Finally, such a comparison will allow us to revisit certain crucial questions regarding the representation of women in surrealist and post-surrealist art and literature.

Bellmer's *poupée*, a life-sized figure fabricated and then photographed by the artist in various settings, represents an adolescent girl in disturbing poses, simultaneously innocent and seductive. Many photographs depict the doll as dismembered, or with body parts unnaturally reduplicated and multiplied, attached at various joints or amassed asymmetrically. These photographs, produced in the 1930s and first published in the surrealist journal *Minotaure* in 1934, have elicited widely varying critical responses, but a sadistic or sadomasochistic quality is almost always noted.

The connection I wish to draw between Bellmer's dolls and Pizarnik's poetic self takes a particularly problematic turn when we consider the question of gender—a question difficult to elide in either artist. Feminist criticism has testified to the male surrealists' view of the female as child muse, angel, erotic object, essentialized Woman—anything but creative individual. What happens, then, when the female artist adopts surrealist attitudes or methods? Robert Belton points out that criticism has often attributed a feminist or proto-feminist attitude to certain women who participated in the international surrealist movement, when in fact “Many of them perpetuated some aspects of the negative iconography of women, perhaps unwittingly or in spite of attempts to subvert them” (51, 58). The crucial question, as Gwen Raaberg formulates it, is “How have the women Surrealists been able to position themselves as creative subjects within this discourse? In what ways and to what extent have they accepted the male surrealist discourse, and how have they significantly changed—subverted, inverted, and extended that discourse?” (4). Such questions are particularly applicable to a critique of writers like Pizarnik, who in their position as post-surrealists have the potential to establish a greater distance from certain features of the historical surrealist iconography and discourse that contemporary readers find troubling. I believe the comparison with Bellmer can provide new insights into Pizarnik's work when we consider that, while acting as a writer highly conscious of her own artistic agency, she obsessively constructs female figures who

lack agency, who are manipulated and acted upon by forces that disarticulate and reduce them. While positioning herself as a creative subject (to borrow Raaberg's terms), Pizarnik creates objects that suffer passively. This dynamic speaks to Pizarnik's lifelong struggle with mental illness, a struggle she carried out primarily with the weapon of the written word.³ Thus, articulation in a linguistic sense continually plays itself out against disarticulation—disjointedness, disassemblage, even dismemberment—in her representation of the female body and psyche.

The gender issue in the case of Hans Bellmer is complicated by the fact that, among his surrealist contemporaries, he strikes many critics as a particularly distressing example of the surrealist objectification of women. Mary Ann Caws' description of the surrealist image of women places Bellmer in the role of prime transgressor:

Headless. And also footless. Often armless too; and always unarmed, except with poetry and passion. There they are, the surrealist women so shot and painted, so stressed and dismembered, punctured and severed: is it any wonder she has (we have) gone to pieces? It is not just the dolls of Hans Bellmer, lying about, it is more. (11)

To be fair, we must acknowledge Bellmer's work as complex and enigmatic (therein lies its peculiar force), and question the assumption of misogynist *intentions*. Belton rightly observes that we cannot determine the intentions of a particular artist with regard to the iconography of female powerlessness in Surrealism: "An image of a bound woman, for example, could be either a fetishistic indulgence for antifeminist reasons or an outcry against the oppression of women" (60). Viewing Bellmer's work historically, critics such as Hal Foster and Therese Lichtenstein have suggested that the *poupée* may have represented a protest against the Nazi attitudes toward the body and toward the degenerate Other—a category that included women, homosexuals, Jews, communists, and the mentally ill. "In this light," says Foster, "the sadism of these mechanistic dolls might be seen, at least in part, as second-degree: a reflexive sadism aimed as an *exposé* at the sadism of fascist father and state" (115). Bellmer's refusal to work for the fascist state and his self-exile from Nazi Germany (beginning in 1938) are biographical details that cor-

roborate such a reading. Nevertheless, as Foster acknowledges at the end of his essay, “there are problems with this work that cannot be resolved away. The *poupées* produce misogynistic effects that may overwhelm any liberatory intentions” (122). For the purposes of a comparison with Pizarnik, it is the powerlessness of Bellmer’s dolls, their averted gaze or empty stare, their dismemberment and the unmistakable marks of suffering that interest me, regardless of the artist’s intended message.

In short, one cannot trace a relationship between Bellmer’s dolls and the self-representation of a woman poet without posing troubling questions about that representation. Does Pizarnik, in the projection of her poetic self onto a Bellmer-like doll, adopt a misogynistic view? If Bellmer’s dolls evoke abuse and sadism, does Pizarnik’s lyric “I” evoke a concomitant victimization? Or can we read her work in a way that suggests ironic distancing from the figure of the disarticulated doll? Put in other terms, does her wide-eyed, passive, sometimes dismembered doll-self recover lost agency precisely through the writing that incarnates her? In exploring this last possibility, I follow the lead of Argentine writer and critic César Aira, who claims that images such as the “little statue of terror” comprise “metaphors for the subject that allow [Pizarnik] to keep making poetry” (10).⁴

Much of Pizarnik’s poetry (I use the term broadly to encompass her creative prose as well) elaborates the trope of the female lyric self as doll, mannequin, or automaton, creating what Aira calls the “autobiographical metaphor” (16).⁵ Even a quick perusal of her work turns up a list of reiterated figures: “the open-eyed one,” “the little forgotten one,” “beautiful automaton,” “the little dead one,” “little statue of terror,” “the sleeping one,” “tiny lady,” “little blind princess,” “little beggar girl,” “the celestial silent one,” “the imprisoned one,” “little paper doll,” “tiny savage,” “tiny pink marionette,” and so forth. Despite differences, certain undeniable similarities obtain in these figures: they are all female, they are diminutive, and they are irrational or not fully conscious. Passive, mechanical, or silent, they lack agency, and sometimes are not even alive. They exist in isolation, without meaningful links to any larger human context. In her introduction to Pizarnik’s *Obras completas* (*Complete Works*, 1994), Silvia Baron Superville identifies “solitude and impotence”

as the fundamental themes of the collection (13). My argument is that Pizarnik incarnates solitude and female impotence in the doll/mannequin figure, and that the plastic art of Hans Bellmer throws a fascinating light on this incarnation. After elaborating upon the physical and psychological character of the dolls in both poet and artist, I will examine a set of motifs related to the doll figure, most notably that of the double. With this in mind, I will explore the implications of Pizarnik's ambivalent participation in what appears to be a disturbingly misogynistic surrealist discourse.

Although there is no direct evidence that Pizarnik knew the works of Hans Bellmer, it is reasonable to postulate some familiarity on her part. Like other Argentine poets who came of age in the 1950s, Pizarnik was weaned on surrealism. Pizarnik's biographer Cristina Piña remarks that "those who marked her most profoundly were the surrealist poets [. . .] whose influence [. . .] truly shapes her life and her poetry" (53). Pizarnik lived in Paris for two intervals during the 1960s, where she came into contact with the "old guard" of surrealism, including Georges Bataille, Max Ernst, and Jean Arp, all of whom she held in high regard (Bordelois 288). In a 1972 interview, Pizarnik herself spoke of "my innate surrealism" (qtd. in Moia 249).⁶ In short, given her attraction to surrealist art and her residence in Paris during the years Bellmer was also living there, it is quite possible that Pizarnik was aware of the *poupée*. We do not need to see the aesthetic relationship between Bellmer and Pizarnik as one of influence, however, but as one of affinity. That is, the significant presence of the doll figure in both artists constitutes neither a direct inheritance nor an odd coincidence; it is rather a common appropriation of a centuries-old motif that was the object of renewed aesthetic interest in the early decades of the twentieth century. Many surrealists, influenced by Giorgio de Chirico, were fascinated with mannequins and automata.⁷ The 1938 *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* in Paris, for example, featured an entire street of mannequins variously dressed and manipulated by such artists as Kurt Seligmann, Max Ernst, and André Masson (Rubin 153).⁸

Whether through surrealist influence or through her own personal inclinations, Pizarnik demonstrated a lifelong fascination with dolls. One Argentine acquaintance of hers in Paris comments

that “With regard to her feelings, I discovered her love for dolls; there was in her a need to remain in that ‘country of one’s own’ (didn’t Rilke define childhood in that way?)” (qtd. in Bordelois 109). A photograph of Pizarnik’s dolls accompanies a collection of poems published in 1971 in the Venezuelan literary journal *Arbol de Fuego*. In a letter to Ivonne Bordelois, Pizarnik comments: “I have a new doll called Lytwyn; I don’t know why it’s a little strange” (qtd. in Bordelois 268). This doll, incidentally, would become a key figure in a late dramatic piece titled “Los poseídos entre lilas” (The Possessed Among Lilacs).

If word and plastic image evoking the doll overlap in Pizarnik, they do so to an even greater degree in Bellmer. Bellmer wrote prose pieces—surrealist in their hermetic and free-associative nature—to accompany his collections of doll photographs, likening the “game” of constructing the doll to writing experimental poetry. In “Memories of the Doll Theme,” written in 1934, he explains the doll’s appeal as an object of artistic creation:

Wasn’t exactly that which the imagination seeks in desire and intensification to be found in the doll (in the image of precisely her dollishness), who only had life in so far as one projected it onto her, who despite her limitless submissiveness understood that she was reserved for despair? Didn’t it spell the final triumph of the young maidens, with their large averted eyes, when their charms were captured rapaciously by the conscious gaze; when with aggressive fingers, grasping after form, slowly, part-by-part, that which the senses and the brain had distilled emerged? (174)

In Bellmer’s conception, the conscious gaze of the male artist “captures” the charms of real girls; this is for him, paradoxically, their “greatest triumph.” His fingers “grasp” at the girls’ form until the *objet d’art* begins to emerge. Bellmer makes no secret of his delight in the Pygmalion act through which male brings female to life, even if aggressively.

Born into a middle-class family, Bellmer came of age during the Nazi’s rise to power. A three-month trip to Paris in 1924–25 introduced him to the work of the surrealists; the connections he established at that point would remain strong for the next several

decades. He crafted his first doll in 1933, initiating what would become an obsessive process that Rosalind Krauss has called the “construction as dismemberment” (86). Like Pizarnik’s “little statue of terror,” the doll was approximately four-and-a-half feet tall, made of papier-mâché and plaster over a skeleton of wood and metal. The detachable head and limbs allowed Bellmer to create mysterious poses and combinations, which he then photographed, often against stark interior backgrounds. Several of the photographs of the first doll were sent to André Breton in Paris via Bellmer’s young cousin Ursula Naguschewski. Breton and the other surrealists immediately embraced Bellmer’s work, publishing several of the photographs in the December 1934 volume *Minotaure* under the title “Doll. Variations on the Assemblage of an Articulated Minor.”

By the time Bellmer constructed his second doll in 1935, he had made an important technical discovery: the ball joint. The painted glue-and-tissue paper surface, combined with the flexibility allowed by the ball joint, created a figure that was at once more lifelike and more susceptible to artistic manipulation than the first doll had been. While the doll’s surface uncannily recalls human flesh, the obsessive recombinations of limbs and appendages around the central ball joint often leave little that resembles a human body. In the more than 100 photographs that Bellmer made of this doll, she is placed in tight, claustrophobic interior settings or outside among trees that recall the forbidding forest of German fairy tales. “These settings,” comments Sue Taylor, “present a clandestine, malevolent world in which the doll is variously bound, beaten, tied to a tree, hung on a hook, or taken apart and strewn on a stairway” (76). Hand tinting, with lurid hues of red, yellows, pinks and greens over muted shades of green or black, heightens the artificial or constructed nature of many photographs. Significantly, the second doll often wears white bobby socks and Mary Jane shoes, a detail that reminds the viewer that, no matter how misshapen, mutilated, or unnatural, this is the representation of an adolescent girl. The masklike face, whose expression is “jarringly blank” (Lichtenstein 29) in many photographs has open eyes that stare at some point we cannot see. The psychological power evinced by these photographs, observes Lichtenstein, “derives from the juxtaposition of shocking victim poses and innocent flirtatiousness [. . .]. The dolls’ dramatic poses in many of the

photographs appear to be melancholic acquiescence: resignation in the face of their violated condition” (16).

In contrast to Bellmer’s dolls, the *muñecas* that appear with increasing frequency in Pizarnik’s later work are not depicted in sensuous detail.⁹ Rather than depicting real bodies, the dolls or doll-like images are expressed abstractly in epithets such as “the open-eyed one” (*Obras* 120). When a physical substance is mentioned in conjunction with Pizarnik’s dolls, it is almost always paper or cardboard, materials that signify both artificiality and fragility. Although the dolls, mannequins, and other diminutive figures in Pizarnik’s poetry are grammatically gendered as female, there is very little direct reference—as there is in Bellmer’s work—to sexual anatomy. One passage from “The Possessed Among Lilacs” underscores Pizarnik’s ironic distancing from an explicit sexual representation of the body. When Carol (a male) presents the doll “Lytwin” to Segismunda, the latter examines it and remarks, “You forgot the sex,” to which Carol replies: “The doll isn’t finished, but that medal from the war of Alsace-Lorraine and those golden bangs and that little embroidered branch indicate that she’s starting to sprout a sex that outdoes even the La Bella Otero” (*Obras* 276).¹⁰ Female sexual anatomy here is potential—not actual, graphic, and foregrounded as it is in many of Bellmer’s drawings and photographs. Yet in both cases adolescent female sexuality is evoked, with its double charge of innocence and seductiveness. Though in a distinct mode of representation, the “co-existence and confusion of the perverse and the banal, of evil and guilelessness” that critics observe in Bellmer’s dolls are applicable to Pizarnik’s doll imagery as well (Taylor 79).

The physical contexts in which Pizarnik places her doll-like figures almost invariably suggest loss, immobility, and melancholy: these are what María Negroni aptly terms “paralytic spaces” (103). We can associate a line such as “The doll in her cage is making autumn” (*Obras* 128) with the tight enclosures and the sense of impending death characterizing many of Bellmer’s photographs. The image of the “little dead girl in a garden of ruins and lilacs” (*Obras* 140) explicitly connects childhood to death, locating that childhood within the romantic trope of the ruined garden. Similarly, the decayed or dilapidated spaces in which Bellmer places his *poupée*, as well as the blankness and dejection of her expression, point to a

melancholy view of childhood in his art. “Although his works are mediated by memories of childhood,” observes Lichtenstein, “they do not recapture an idealized past but one that exists as a ruin [. . .]. They depict the ungratified longing of youth, denying the utopian impulses usually associated with memories or thoughts of that period of life and revealing it instead as a time of sorrow and struggle” (152). Likewise, the depiction of childhood in Pizarnik is by no means a simple matter of nostalgia for a lost golden age. In a 1962 diary entry written in Paris, Pizarnik hints at darker memories: “In spite of my comical qualities, I say that a damaged childhood deserves the gravest silence” (*Semblanza* 257). In her poetry, childhood and adolescence are a time of wildness, of being at odds with the adult world, and of possessing an almost frightening vitality whose other face is sadness and guilt. This complexity is summed up well in the following passage from *El infierno musical* (*The Musical Hell*, 1971), the last volume published in Pizarnik’s lifetime:

The beauty of a somber childhood, the unforgivable sadness among dolls, statues, mute things, propitious for the double monologue between me and my lecherous den [. . .]. We have tried to ask forgiveness for what we did not do, for imaginary offenses, for phantasmal sins. We have atoned for mist, for no one, for shadows. (*Obras* 158)

The poet’s evocation of childhood involves strongly ambivalent feelings: though beautiful, that childhood was somehow somber; though she claims innocence, there were acts and emotions for which she must atone. The child here is located in a primitive enclosed space—“my lecherous den”—accompanied by mute beings whose presence allows for a kind of solipsistic (and possibly autoerotic) “double monologue.” This scene is utterly Bellmeresque; it recalls in particular a 1934 pencil and gouache drawing entitled “Doll in a Brick Cell.” In this drawing a transparent female figure, headless, armless, and with parts of her torso eaten away, is suspended against the corner of a crumbling garden wall on which a half-decayed tree trunk rests. Close to the doll are a hoop and a beach ball. This drawing belongs to a series that “plays on precisely this discomfiting conjuncture of childish sexuality and deathlike claustrophobia” (Lichtenstein 39).

Alienation, sexual anxiety, and a sense of vulnerability are traits that mark Pizarnik's poetic self and that also reverberate in the visual impressions created by Bellmer's work. In a series of lyric fragments entitled "The Little Songs," which connects articulation to alienation ("no one knows me I speak the night / no one knows me I speak my body [. . .]"), fragment VI reads:

a bird-boned doll
leads the perfumed dogs
of my own words that return to me (*Obras* 234)

The doll with the bones of a bird condenses the feeling of fragility into one poignant image. This image eerily echoes a photograph of the first Bellmer doll, which shows her head carefully placed next to the head of a bird-like creature, both of which are wrapped in black gauze and cradled on a bed of lace.¹¹ Pizarnik's doll in the above passage is an active figure, leading the "perfumed dogs," but by the third verse we realize that this action is circular and therefore without consequence. It is significant that the dogs are in fact words, which move outward only to return to the speaker. Such an image hints at Pizarnik's complicated relationship to poetry as a creative act that continually fails to shift the subject out of her solipsistic space.

In many poems, the female subject's vulnerability is linked to her condition of semi-consciousness, emblemized by the act of sleepwalking: "a silk girl / now sleepwalking on the cornice of fog" (*Obras* 74). This image creates a breathtaking sense of imminent danger, a pre-mortem that contrasts with the post-mortem impression given by many of Bellmer's photographs. In some cases, Pizarnik's speaker signals vulnerability in a female third person, an *other* with whom she then identifies: "The mysterious automaton dances alone. I share her fear of being a very young animal on the first night of the hunt" (*Obras* 120). Again, danger or even death is imminent, and the female figure lacks agency in her trancelike state. An even more deliberate shift from third to first person occurs in another image of vulnerability and ruin: "Mannequin naked among the rubble," with the speaker concluding several lines later, "I speak of myself, naturally" (*Obras* 193). This self-reflexive rhetoric points to a significant difference between Pizarnik and Bellmer. Although

psychoanalytical arguments have been made for Bellmer's masochistic identification with the fragile and abused dolls he fabricated,¹² his created images remain resolutely *other*, outside himself as creator. In Pizarnik, the distance between the poetic voice and the doll is minimal or nonexistent. Pizarnik constantly reminds the reader that the figures she creates are not objects of an external gaze, but embodiments of her own alienated self: "Wax figures the others and above all I, who am more other than they" (*Obras* 138).

The images I have discussed thus far involve a whole-bodied doll, but in fact Pizarnik's poetry often represented the female figure as disarticulated or dismembered. The motif is an old one, and remains open to numerous interpretations. In his essay on "The Uncanny" (1919), Freud remarks that "Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, feet which dance by themselves—all these have something particularly uncanny about them [. . .]" (151). Freud's essay revolves around a discussion of E.T.A. Hoffmann's story "The Sandman," first published in 1817. The protagonist of this story, Nathaniel, has suffered since childhood from the fear of having his eyes cut out. Nathaniel develops an obsession with a beautiful young woman, Olympia, who is in fact a highly sophisticated automaton; he commits suicide not long after discovering the secret of his "beloved." Bellmer scholars point out that the artist began producing his dolls shortly after he attended a performance of Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann* in 1933. In the opera, the first act ends with the doll Olympia being torn limb from limb (in the story, she is merely carried off with her eye sockets empty and bleeding). The opera no doubt suggested visual and plastic possibilities to Bellmer within the interconnected motifs of the double, the uncanny, and the disarticulated doll. In "Memories of the Doll Theme," in fact, he speaks of the process of sculpting the *poupée* as one of "creating beauty and also distributing the salt of deformation a bit vengefully" (174). It is difficult to overlook the fact that in Hoffmann's story, Offenbach's opera, and Bellmer's dolls alike, misogynistic acts of violence are perpetrated against the female figure.

By contrast, the "salt of deformation" in Pizarnik is a source not of aesthetic pleasure but of subjective angst. Pizarnik's female figure, like Bellmer's, is often represented as headless or as completely dis-

membered, “the body unfastened and the bones scattered” (*Obras* 144). Who or what are the causes of this violence? In the case of Bellmer’s dolls, the artist himself is, on the most concrete level, the force behind the doll’s disintegration. One 1934 photograph features Bellmer’s own semi-transparent image superimposed on an image of the first doll. He bends over to stand head-to-head with the doll, which consists of the torso with its exposed mechanized interior, the head (with disheveled hair and beret), one plaster-cast leg and one skeletal, broomstick leg. She looks away; he stares fixedly at the camera. Though shadowy, the artist is complete, in control, in touch, while the doll is none of these.

In contrast, Pizarnik’s agents of corporeal disintegration are never concrete or fully externalized. As David William Foster argues in his article “The Representation of the Body in the Poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik,” the subject’s integrity, both physical and psychic, is violated by personified abstract forces (such as night or death), or by hypostasized entities (such as articles of clothing or body parts). The *yo poético* often appears as a passive victim of these destructive forces: “The wind had eaten / part of my face and my hands. / They called me ragged angel. I waited” (*Obras* 111). Even more pertinent to the doll characterization is the suggestion of self-duplication in which the subject is both agent and victim: “The dolls disemboweled by my old doll hands, the disappointment of finding pure stuffing” (*Obras* 153). An important passage from “Extraction of the Stone of Folly” takes us back to the ruined garden, where the subject similarly disarticulates herself:

Vision in mourning, torn apart, of a garden with broken statues. At the edge of dawn your bones ached. You tear yourself apart. I am warning you and I warned you of this. You dismantle yourself. I tell you this, I told you this. You undress yourself. You dispossess yourself. You detach yourself. I foretold this for you. Suddenly it’s come apart: no birth [. . .]. Now for your scraps: to pick them up one by one, such ennui, where to leave them. (*Obras* 139)

The physical disarticulation described in this “vision enlutada”—the figure literally tearing herself apart—is reinforced by the verbal disarticulation implicit in the slippage between the “you” and the

“I.” The rhetorical force of this passage in Spanish is achieved by the obsessive repetition of verbs of undoing, all marked by the prefix *des-*: *desgarrar* (tear apart), *desarmar* (dismantle or disarm), *desnudar* (undress), *desposeer* (dispossess or relinquish), *desunir* (detach), and *deshacer* (undo, unmake, destroy), all gathered together in the final crucial noun *despojos*: the spoils, scraps, or waste left after an act of plunder or destruction. The outcome is death, or at least the failure of birth (“ningún nacimiento”). Although the speaker addresses a second person *tú*, the very reflexive and interior nature of these verbs suggests a doubling rather than a true relationship between separate beings. If this reading is accurate, the poetic subject is relating the story of her own dismemberment and her sense of bewilderment at the task of gathering the dispersed parts. The fact that this scene is presided over by “broken statues” is yet another clue to the uncanny forces at work.

The statue, the mannequin, and the doll are all externalized images of the psychic notion of doubling, a theme that has been amply explored in literature, art, and psychoanalysis. Otto Rank, a contemporary of Freud, argues in broad terms that the double “personifies narcissistic self-love,” and that the notion of the immortal soul may have been the original double of the body (86). Rank claims that for the primitive mind, the double (including shadows and reflections) was conceived as a means of ensuring the survival of the ego, but that it later developed a second character as a harbinger of death. Freud cites Rank in his study of the uncanny, noting that themes of uncanniness “are all concerned with the idea of a ‘double’ in every shape and degree” (140). Freud concludes that “the ‘uncanny’ is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (123–24). Like Rank, Freud appeals to an atavistic sense, a recurrence in the modern consciousness of “primitive” animistic thought which attributed a material existence (and magical powers) to the dead. Thus, the doll is uncanny because it “reminds” us of death-in-life, a sense exacerbated by the involuntary, repetitive mechanical processes at work in such a figure.

Bellmer’s fascination with images of the double is evident in both his writings and his artistic production. His pseudo-theoretical text “Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint” explains the power of

desire to displace, replace, or double parts of the body. The repression of sexuality in puberty, Bellmer argues, leads to the imaginative multiplication of body parts and the projection of sexual images onto non-sexual spaces. The photographs of the second doll evoke a two-tiered notion of the double: first, the doll itself, in its uncanny likeness to an adolescent female body, is obviously a simulacrum of a living being. Second, the doll manifests myriad combinations of the doubling or multiplying of limbs and other body parts. The doublings in these cases are not mirror images but asymmetrical appendages, often arranged against backgrounds that suggest seduction and punishment.

Pizarnik, as we have seen, typically locates the forces destructive to body and psyche both outside and inside the subject, by creating a *tú* that functions primarily as an alter ego for the *yo*. Critics of Pizarnik's work have given ample attention to the notion of doubling, which Chávez Silverman considers "perhaps the single most salient feature of Pizarnik's poetry" (277). Rank's notion of the double as a wish-defense against forces of destruction is transparently rendered in passages that speak directly of the splitting of the self: "Nocturnal round. A clown smiles dazzlingly and turns me into a doll: *So that you never wither away* (he says)" (*Obras* 211).

Pizarnik's most striking use of the doll figure to explore themes of doubling and loss of selfhood occurs in the prose work she produced in the years immediately preceding her death.¹³ One recurrent scene-motif, recalling Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, features a surrealist version of the tea party: "Under a tree, in front of the house, there was a table, and seated at it, death and the girl were drinking tea. A doll was seated between them, indescribably beautiful, and death and the girl looked at her more than at the twilight, while at the same time talking over her head" (*Obras* 198). The contrast here between the childish innocence of the tea party and the direct communion with death recalls the bobby socks, lace, and hair-bows of Bellmer's dolls, whose expressions always suggest the lurking presence of death. In the tea party scene, the doubling becomes a triangulation, with the beautiful and clueless doll and savvy Death being two simultaneous projections of the girl. A single uncanny image ends this brief prose poem: "The doll opened her eyes." The doll, initially an inert figure capable only of attract-

ing the gaze of others who speak “over her head,” suddenly performs a minute but significant act of self-awareness. Pizarnik ends the piece with this image, leaving the doll’s agency as an enigmatic possibility.

The previously mentioned dramatic piece “The Possessed Among Lilacs,” one of Pizarnik’s late works, takes the doll-as-double as its organizing metaphor. In this work, clearly modeled after Artaud’s theater of the absurd, a green doll is given to a female character called Segismunda. “Seg” announces that she will name the doll “Lytwin,” a name that evokes the notion of twin or double. Precisely in the manner of Bellmer’s dolls, Lytwin is “adorable and sinister at the same time” (*Obras* 282). After Carol determines that the doll is unable to stand on her own, Seg takes her and declares “She’s looking at me and meditating,” a sign of the doll’s incipient consciousness (277). Seg further perceives Lytwin as desiring human language, even poetry: “Besides, it’s as if she were asking me for words to eat. She’s hungry for poems” (*Obras* 277). A moment later, the doll begins to speak. To Seg’s question “Who are you?” Lytwin replies, “I am an I, and this, which seems unimportant, is more than enough for a doll” (*Obras* 282).

Here Lytwin unequivocally declares her existence as a subject—although the reader will see little consequence for this selfhood as the play proceeds. This exchange curiously mirrors the opening of Bellmer’s “Notes on the Subject of the Ball Joint,” in which he speaks of the toy as a “provocative object,” particularly a toy like “the most worthless of rag dolls” that has no predetermined function:

For such a doll, full of affective contents but suspected of only being a representation and a fictitious reality, to seek out in the external world, in the shock of encounters the unquestionable proofs of its existence, it is necessary, besides, that this external world, the tree, the staircase, or the chair, suspected of being only perception, demonstrate what the me has gathered there of the you. (212)

In Pizarnik’s text we see that the doll begins to assume a human existence, transcending her limitations as “a representation and a fictitious reality” when she comes into contact with Segismunda. (We recall the tea-party doll that suddenly opens her eyes.) This

dynamic once again reflects Rank's claim that the double serves as a defense against the destruction of the ego. In the text of "The Possessed," however, this beneficial relationship does not last. Shortly after the above exchange, and near the end of the play, Carol finds Lytwin, bangs her against the wall and hands her brutally to Seg with the words "Here's your double" (*Obras* 288). Like Hoffmann's Olympia, the doll/double is treated violently at the story's end, reminding us that she was never in fact a subject but rather a created, gazed-upon, and ultimately abused object.¹⁴

Given that in both Bellmer and Pizarnik the doll functions as a significant trope, a figure upon whom sometimes sordid dramas of selfhood and otherness are played out, what can we conclude about the relationship of this figure to its creator? How does the gender dynamic function differentially in the visual artist and the poet with respect to the doll? We note that like Bellmer, but for strikingly different reasons, Pizarnik insists upon an ambivalent relationship of subject to object. In the long prose poem "Extraction of the Stone of Folly," from which I have already cited extensively, the speaker imagines a painting that comes to life, with a "Florentine boy" who extends a hand and "invites you to remain at his side in the terrible happiness of being an object to look at and admire" (*Obras* 136). Here Pizarnik suggests oxymoronically that being an *objet d'art*, or a body that is the object of another's gaze, involves a "terrible happiness," a deep discomfort that is paradoxically a source of pleasure.

There are concrete instances in Pizarnik's poetry of a female subject who expresses dismay at being not only the object of the other's gaze, but, like Bellmer's doll, the very object of his creation. The speaker of "Extraction" recounts such an act of creation: "He smiles and I am a tiny pink marionette with a sky-blue umbrella I enter through his smile I make my little house on his tongue I live in the palm of his hand he closes his fingers a golden dust a little blood goodbye oh goodbye" (*Obras* 137). The paratactic structure of this passage, with its suppressed connectors and insistent rhythm, reinforces the girl-marionette's breathless registry of her loss of agency. She exists—diminutively and decoratively—only as the product of "his" smile. She builds her house on his tongue, giving precedence to his voice. His power over her is, in short, total: an insignificant gesture on his part reduces her to dust. In this scenario Pizarnik's

doll-subject mourns her dissolution at the hands of the one who created her—an emotive stance reminiscent of the doll Bellmer imagines in her “limitless submissiveness,” who “understood that she was reserved for despair” (“Memories” 174).

Pizarnik’s poetry presents the doll figure as a trope for the human dynamic in which one being—a concrete person or personified abstract force—controls the selfhood of another. The *other* that assumes control is not consistently marked as masculine in her work, which suggests that gender is ultimately less important than the power differential itself.¹⁵ For the human subject who views herself as stripped of agency and silenced, the doll serves as the ideal plastic image. The reader can almost imagine Bellmer’s doll addressing her creator with these words: “You choose the place of the wound / in which we speak our silence. / You make of my life / this excessively pure ceremony” (*Obras* 91). The *yo* here is fully controlled by the *tú*; she is wounded in a place she does not choose, and from that wound comes not communication—or communing—but silence. Her very life is reduced by the other to superficial and sterile forms, “pure” ceremonies in place of impure but real existence.

If the doll/mannequin—or more broadly, the representation of the immobilized, sometimes dismembered female body—served for the male surrealists as a site for the projection of desire, for Pizarnik it served as a site for the obsessive representation of damaged selfhood. Susan Rubin Suleiman, in mapping out a new territory for those women artists who followed the initial surrealist project, claims that

A woman Surrealist . . . cannot simply assume a subject position and take over a stock of images elaborated by the male imaginary; in order to innovate, she has to invent her own position as subject and elaborate her own set of images—different from, yet as empowering as the image of the exposed female body, with its endless potential for manipulation, disarticulation and rearticulation, fantasizing and projection, is for her male colleagues. (“Double Margin” 164)

Certain women artists, such as the contemporary American photographer Cindy Sherman, do in fact elaborate a set of images in dialogue with Bellmer and other surrealists, images that parody the

surrealist iconography of the female body.¹⁶ Pizarnik's use of the doll image, in contrast, is more transparently tragic than ironic. If, as Suleiman suggests, Sherman is saying to Bellmer, "Yes, but . . ." ("Dialogue" 138), Pizarnik seems to be simply saying "Yes." With the exception of Lytwin's hopeful assertion that "I am an *I*," Pizarnik does not project a defiant or self-affirming attitude onto the doll. In contrast to certain women artists associated with the historical surrealist movement, such as Remedios Varo or Leonora Carrington, Pizarnik does not develop images of self-representation that significantly realign patriarchal views of the feminine.

We can conclude that Pizarnik's own post-surrealist project responds more to the overwhelming needs of the self in pain than to the broader social or political agenda suggested by Suleiman. Rather than engendering a new set of "empowering" images arising from the figure of the doll, Pizarnik for the most part reiterates and exploits the conventional iconography associated with it. Yet in doing so, she creates a body of lyrical work that is haunting and incisive. The diminutive female figures she obsessively constructs in a ritual of self-representation lack agency. But Pizarnik as a writer does not. She is, after all, the dollmaker and not the doll. Like the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo—another surrealist-associated artist for whom the boundaries of the self were a source of unremitting anxiety—Pizarnik uses her medium, language, to challenge the forces of silence and dissolution that she perceived as a constant threat. Until the moment of her suicide, Pizarnik avows that the writer's blank page is the only possible habitat for the fragile doll: "there she must be able to live, the little doll made of green, blue and red paper; there she must be able to rise up and maybe walk in her little house drawn on a blank page" (*Obras* 144).

Notes

1 The passage is taken from Pizarnik's *Obras completas*, 236. All translations from the Spanish are my own.

2 In David William Foster's words, "[. . .] there is a critical consensus that Pizarnik's poetry (both in traditional verse form and in the form of non-metrical prose microtexts) is of indisputable importance" (322). Regarding

the relationship to Sylvia Plath, see especially Susan Bassnett, "Speaking with Many Voices: The Poems of Alejandra Pizarnik" (36).

3 In her biography of Pizarnik, Cristina Piña speaks on several occasions of Alejandra's lifelong addiction to amphetamines, which began in late adolescence, and to her wildly fluctuating mood swings, in all likelihood a symptom of bipolar disorder. Finally, we know that Pizarnik made several attempts at suicide before succeeding in 1972, from an overdose of sleeping pills. For a discussion of evidence of Pizarnik's emotional instability, see especially Piña pp. 181 and 218. The question of mental illness is of course complicated by Pizarnik's conscious attempts to emulate the aesthetic, if not the lifestyle, of Arthur Rimbaud and other "decadent" poets, as well as her admiration for the surrealists' conscious cultivation of madness as a means to open the doors of creativity.

4 Aira elaborates: "The subject as fictional character, split into girls, into sleepwalking or shipwrecked females, allowed Alejandra Pizarnik to move forward in her writing without falling into the conventions of the traditional sentimental lyric" (18).

5 The autobiographical connection is corroborated by a diary entry in which Pizarnik writes: "I look at myself in the mirror and seem an adolescent" (*Semblanza* 123).

6 Many critics, including Francisco Lasarte and Suzanne Chávez Silverman, have rightly disputed Pizarnik's surrealist tendencies, insisting that her work lacks the surrealists' characteristic optimism and faith in the "magical" potentiality of language. Others, such as Enrique Pezzoni, have observed the "vigilance" that Pizarnik exercises over her poetic production, a practice that distances her from the automatic, free-associative techniques of the original surrealist writers. César Aira, the critic who treats Pizarnik's connection to surrealism most extensively, declares that she "lived and read and wrote in the wake of surrealism" (11). She subverts the surrealist project, however, by turning the objective poetic material into the intensively subjective, and by giving precedence to "the iron-fisted control over quality" (Aira 20–21). My point here is not to enter into the discussion regarding the surrealist nature of her poetry, but rather to avow her personal and

artistic connections to the movement, which informed her conception of the doll figure as projection of the poetic self.

7 Bellmer's interest in de Chirico's mannequins is discussed in Webb's *Hans Bellmer* (48). See also Chapter Five of Hal Foster's *Convulsive Beauty*, in which the surrealist fascination with mannequins is discussed at length.

8 The influence was two-way: although Bellmer was undoubtedly responding to a surrealist interest in mannequins, wax figures, and the like, his *poupée* stimulated further surrealist production of such figures. Bellmer's biographer, Peter Webb, goes so far as to call Bellmer's doll the prototype of the surrealist mannequin (46).

9 There are myriad references to diminutive female figures in Pizarnik's early poetry, beginning with *La última inocencia* (*The Last Innocence*) in 1956. However, the term *muñeca* (doll) does not appear until the collection *Extracción de la piedra de locura* (*Extraction of the Stone of Folly*), published in 1968. From this volume forward, references to dolls appear frequently.

10 La Bella Otero (1865-1965) was a world famous Spanish dancer of La Belle Epoque.

11 It is pertinent to recall here another of Pizarnik's lyric fragments: "My childhood and its scent / of a caressed bird" (38). There is an almost explicit link between this passage and a photograph from Bellmer's first doll series, in which a male hand (the artist's?) caresses the head of the doll, whose gaze is averted and who appears to evade the contact.

12 Hal Foster states that "The dolls not only trace a shifting of desire; they also represent a shattering—of the female object, to be sure, but also of the male subject" (107). In a similar vein, Taylor claims that "If the photographs of the second doll, depicting untold violence against vulnerable female subjects, parallel conscious beating fantasies, their overt sadism represents only the manifest content of such fantasies. The latent content of these images is masochistic suffering, aggression turned in on the self" (91).

13 Piña, in her biography *Alejandra Pizarnik*, speaks of Pizarnik's "angus-

tia” (anguish) in the last period of her life, which “propelled her to continue increasing her consumption of amphetamines and to intensify the terrible spiral of the stimulants-for-alertness/narcotics-for-sleep, with the resultant alternation between excitation and depression. Thus, her friends might on a certain evening hear her speak indefatigably—seductive, entertaining, lucid, and clever—and the following day discover that she had fallen into a well so deep that no one could pull her out” (218). This evidence of her alternating psychic states may well have manifested itself in an intensification of the topos of the double in her poetry.

14 At the conclusion of his examination of literary images of the double, Rank claims, “Here we are at the significant theme of suicide, at which point a whole series of characters come to their ends while pursued by their doubles” (77). He notes that, in addition to pursuit by the double, another cause of suicide is paradoxically the loss of the image of the double, as is the case with Hoffmann’s Nathaniel. A psychoanalytic reading of Pizarnik’s “Possessed” marks the destruction of the doll Lytwin as another instance of the loss of the image of the double, one of the myriad textual prefigurations of Pizarnik’s own suicide.

15 Susan Bassnett, considering Pizarnik’s text *La condesa sangrienta* (*The Bloody Countess*, 1975), claims in fact that “the subtext of Pizarnik’s writing concerns not so much the violence that crosses gender boundaries, but rather the violence perpetrated by women against women” (“Blood and Mirrors” 132).

16 Sherman’s “Untitled 261” (1993), for instance, features a reconstructed female mannequin’s body that echoes both Bellmer’s dolls and Max Ernst’s painting “Anatomy of a Bride” (c. 1921). The mannequin’s plasticized body parts, particularly her unnaturally upturned vulva, strip the figure of any sign of seductiveness. Likewise, her “Untitled 263” portrays a Bellmeresque double torso with truncated limbs. In this case, however, the figure is fully hermaphroditic, displaying both vulva and penis. The female side of the torso, with its full pubic hair and tampon string, deliberately negates and demystifies Bellmer’s evocation of female adolescent sexuality.

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